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The Great Airport Muddle

MERVYN JONES

Doubts and muddle still surround the thorny question of a new airport for London. On 11 April Mr J. P. W. Mallalieu, Minister of State at the Board of Trade, told a conference of air experts that the government's decision would be announced 'within the next fortnight'. This could only mean a decision in favour of Stansted, since no other site for a third London airport has been the subject of thorough survey and inquiry. But the announcement has not yet been made, and it now appears that cabinet ministers as well as civil servants disagree. The real cause for anxiety is that the decision is being deferred in a double sense. Even if the government now plumps firmly for Stansted, the really big decisions - matching the expansion of air traffic to be expected in the 1970s - will remain to be faced. For the fundamental case against any such airport is that we should not relieve the deficiencies of Heathrow by building more Heathrows. We need to think about airports for Britain - not just London.

Under the Attlee government, civil aviation was under the control of the Ministry of Transport. The MoT's powers included the construction, ownership and management of airports. Gradually - the turning-point was the Tory government's Airports Act in 1961 - this unity has been dissolved. The Board of Trade now has a general responsibility, but most airports today are under local ownership. There is certainly a case for decentralisation, but the logical airport body would be a regional one. In fact most airports are owned by municipalities - so that we have, for instance, a fierce struggle for customers between Manchester and Liverpool airports which are only 30 miles apart.

The cuckoo in this nest is the British Airports Authority. Aside from the wasting asset of Prestwick, the BAA's empire consists of Heathrow, Gatwick and the future London airport or airports. Not surprisingly, airport men elsewhere jealously call it the London Airports Authority. It is true that governments have been largely concerned to safeguard London's supremacy over Paris and Frankfurt as the big European air junction. Hence the increasing congestion at London's airports, to which travellers from elsewhere in Britain - either changing from 'feeder' services, or arriving in London by road or rail - have significantly contributed. Manchester is the only other airport with much in the way of transatlantic and European services. Permission to develop such routes is a matter for the Air Transport Licensing Board, whose policy remains heavily London-oriented. But conscious planning on these lines would soon involve decisions on the building, expansion or limitation of airports - in fact, an airport map of Britain. It is not the business of the BAA or the Board of Trade to plan in this sense.

Though good services of the Leeds-Rome type, especially in holiday traffic, would do something to relieve the load on London, nothing can prevent that load from growing heavier. General-purpose airports of the Heathrow type are ultimately inadequate to meet the situation; and the more such airports we have, the more intractable becomes the problem of transit passengers crossing London from one to another. More and more thought, therefore, is being given to a solution recognising the existence of different kinds of traffic. This might enable London to manage indefinitely with only two passenger airports (a separate freight airport may be desirable before 1980).

Short-haul passengers - to British destinations, Paris, Dublin and Amsterdam - mostly travel as individuals. They would take happily to hourly shuttle services which eliminate advance booking and check-in, with passengers limited to luggage they can carry. Since delays are minimal, no elaborate buildings with shops and lounges are necessary. Short-haul passengers won't tolerate a long trip to the city centre, and it is hard to prevent them from bringing their cars and parking at the airport, since they will soon be returning. But there need not be many night services, so a short-haul airport surrounded by housing is feasible.

The long-distance passengers of the future will travel, to a great extent, either in supersonic aircraft or in jumbo jets carrying 500 or more people. It will be quite intolerable to have them milling about looking for 50-seat buses, taxis and hire cars. The real

headaches in planning the big airport of the 1970s will not be sheer size or runway length, but the scale of airport buildings and customs hall, and transport from airport to city. A form of mass transport (rail or perhaps monorail) catering solely to airport needs will be a necessity, and the luggage of each jumbo-jet regiment may also have to be carried on freight principles, maybe in rail containers. But if this transport is fast and convenient, the airport could reasonably be quite a distance from the traveller's destination. Indeed, there are many reasons why no airport of sufficient size can be sited in the commuter belt.

Where then could it be? If we give supreme importance to the noise threat, we should plump for a big coastal airport. The site most favoured by this school of thought is the Isle of Sheppey. On the other hand, there is a case for thinking primarily of the 'catchment area', and this would mean an airport quickly reached by people living both in London and in the Midlands. It must also be remembered that a big airport employs 30,000 people. To build such an airport is in effect to build a new town - indeed, it is more than that if we want to avoid a single-industry town.

Reuther Quits the Consensus

ANDREW KOPKIND

It is useful, if hardly comforting, to see the Johnson administration as the very model of a modern, pragmatic, compassionate Labour government. All the familiar, endearing characteristics of Labourism are there. Abroad, it follows a contradictory, destructive and expedient foreign policy. At home, it encourages monopolistic concentration and huge corporate profits, while meeting union demands with frozen stares. Its concepts of social welfare and democratic participation are outmoded and inadequate, and its leaders are out of touch with the most exciting and progressive movements of the last 20 years. It has alienated the intellectual class and ignored the under-class - both of which worked so hard to bring it to power in the first place. Now, true to form, it has suffered the resignation of its most active and articulate union leader.

✓ Walter Reuther's 'resignation' is informal, in the way that the Association of American labour and government is only perceptual. But the administration knows that labour is its most dependable constituency, and 'Big Labour' - the leadership of the AFL-CIO - perceives itself to be an integral part of the administration. President Johnson gives labour promises, of a sort; President George Meany delivers the votes, after a fashion.

For some reason, Reuther has lost his sense of togetherness. His 1.5 million Auto Workers comprise the biggest union still within the Confederation (the Teamsters are bigger, but outside the AFL-CIO), but in the course of several months, he has become the chief drop-out from the old school of consensus. Last summer, he blasted the Confederation's support of the war in Vietnam

as 'intemperate, hysterical, jingoistic and unworthy'. He then attacked Jay Lovestone, the ex-communist who now directs the AFL-CIO's ferociously anti-communist foreign operations as a miniature CIA. Last fall he tried to redirect the whole foreign policy of the Confederation to an opening on the Left; Meany defeated him. In December Reuther called Big Labour 'complacent'; in February he and his top assistants walked out of their offices on the Confederation's governing boards (and Reuther resigned from two para-CIA programmes which the organisation ran in Latin America and Africa). Last weekend he got the virtually unanimous consent of a United Auto Workers' Special congress to withdraw from the AFL-CIO entirely, whenever he wants.

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